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NFL's brain trauma issue won't go away

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BY RICK TELANDER Sports Columnist January 16, 2014 10:11PM

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So you thought the NFL's brain-trauma issue was settled when the league agreed to dole out \$765 million to settle a lawsuit brought by former players?

Put your helmets back on, folks.

Upon review, U.S. District Judge Anita Brody rejected the settlement this week, saying "the sum may not be enough to cover injured players."

No kidding.

That \$765 million sounds like a lot, but not when you consider that 4,500 former players were part of the suit. Or that there are about 20,000 more former players who might have their own brain issues down the road — the ones who are still alive, of course.

And that's the grim part of the deal: The NFL will profit from harming its workers, then pay (minimally) later for doing so.

The rejected settlement gave specific numbers for horrific forms of brain damage.

Let me ask you this: Would you take Parkinson's disease and \$3.5 million, spread over many years? How about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — better known as Lou Gehrig's disease — for \$5 million? With ALS, a victim's motor neurons slowly degenerate until the person becomes paralyzed over months or years and eventually suffocates or is otherwise fatally debilitated. And through it all, the brain remains alert but incapacitated.

Oh, and suicide. According to the settlement, families of those who shoot themselves — such as Ray Easterling, Junior Seau or Dave Duerson — might get as much as \$4 million.

Blood money, really.

Anyway, this head issue in football isn't going away any time soon.

It's possible the former players' suit quickly will be amended with a few billion dollars of chump change added to the pot. Remember, the NFL makes more than \$9 billion a year, with some analysts saying \$25 billion in annual revenue might be reached in the near future.

The \$765 million over decades for thousands of damaged former players looks like the ludicrously tiny sum it is when compared with Dodgers pitcher Clayton Kershaw getting \$215 million to throw a ball for seven years.

There are uprisings on other fronts, too. The mother of former Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher, who shot and killed his girlfriend, then shot and killed himself in front of team officials in December 2012, has sued the Chiefs for wrongful death, stating her son was once a gentle, considerate man but that “repetitive head trauma” made him dysfunctional.

Recently, former Bears quarterback Bobby Douglass and former Northwestern linebacker John Cornell, who participated in two Saints training camps, filed suit against the NFL and helmet-maker Riddell for brain damage. I played with Cornell at Northwestern, and I remember him as a ferocious hitter. His nickname was “Bumps” because he had knobs on his forehead from collisions. He was a no-nonsense, intense, team-oriented man. A perfect football teammate.

Which brings up another complexity of our sudden awareness of brain damage from football: What if the same trauma is occurring at the college level? At the high school level? At the peewee level? It’s unreasonable to think only pro players hurt their heads.

Chicago personal-injury attorney Joseph Siprut is leading the way with a consolidated lawsuit against the NCAA for its lack of head-trauma awareness. His star plaintiff is former Eastern Illinois safety Adrian Arrington, whose head-banging apparently has caused him everything from memory loss to behavior change, sleep disorder and seizures. And he’s only 27.

Who will go after high schools and peewee leagues — and how — is still up in the air. To kill football at all levels doesn’t seem to be anybody’s goal. Even brothers Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru, the co-authors of the damning new book *League of Denial: The NFL, Concussions and the Battle for the Truth*, don’t want football ended, just better regulated.

That’s a tough thing when all that has come up for safety is a vague tackling technique called “heads up” and claims by tons of charlatans, would-be profiteers and brain “experts” that this or that test or helmet will solve all.

Even Bears great and Hall of Famer Gale Sayers, 70, is suing the NFL for brain damage. He claims concussions have caused “loss of memory, dementia, Alzheimer’s, neurological disorder, depression, sleep problems and irritability.”

I talked with Sayers last fall. He was pleasant and kind, but his memory seemed shot. He repeated things, and it just seemed kind of sad.

No, this brain stuff isn’t going away. Nor should it.

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